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Intelligence in the 1980s

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Abstract The 1980s will see revolutionary changes in intelligence analysis and assessment, matching the changes in collection in the past few decades. Information management will be improved by technology, analysis techniques will be refined by new disciplines, and intelligence warnings will be more pointed by improved communication modes and by providing them to a wider public. Intelligence in the information age will become a public function, not merely a secret service.

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The profession and discipline of "intelligence" faces a major turning point in the 1980s. If successfully navigated, these years will mark the culmination of the growth of a truly American intelligence system, as different from traditional and foreign systems as American society, culture, and government contrast with those abroad. The result can be a remarkable improvement in our nation's ability to analyze, judge, and make decisions about international affairs.

For centuries, intelligence was the small, private preserve of monarchs and generals. Governmental and military espionage ferreted out the secrets of other powers in order to provide its sponsors with advantage in their dealings. Secret agents intrigued and subverted in order to discredit an opponent or support their adversaries within his own camp. The spy was the prototype of this traditional "intelligence" discipline.

The first American change in this traditional posture was launched by William J. Donovan in World War II's Office of Strategic Services. His adventurous character certainly fitted the old tradition and he built America's first worldwide service for espionage and for secret action among guerrillas and liberation movements. But his adventurous spirit was matched by an equally intense intellectual bent. Thus, in his new intelligence organization he assembled a corps of academic experts to "centralize" all the relevant information, that was overtly available as well as that secretly obtained, to analyze it and to come to conclusions about its significance. He gave this corps full status within the organization and, indeed, praised it first in his final remarks to OSS in October 1945, ahead of his other personnel "in direct contact with the enemy."

This "central" contribution was so missed by President Truman when he disbanded OSS that he reestablished the central staff a very few months later in January 1946. While public opinion was transfixed—and continues to this day to be so—on the more adventurous aspects of intelligence, this central capability grew and became the key feature of the modern American approach to intelligence.

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